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SUBJECT: RAJSHAHI: CRACKS IN THE HAPPIEST CITY ON EARTH

¶1. (SBU) Summary: When Dhaka University erupted in anti-government protests on August 20, the unrest quickly spread to Rajshahi University in northwest Bangladesh. During a visit to Rajshahi September 11-12, PolOff spoke to several credible witnesses who said only a small fraction of university students were involved in the rioting that, unlike Dhaka, failed to spread to the general population. Most people PolOff interviewed were optimistic that there won't be another spasm of violence should school reopen as scheduled in late October. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The 750-acre mildew-streaked Rajshahi University campus lies on the outskirts of Bangladesh, s fourth largest city. It has about 25,000 students, making it the second largest in the country after Dhaka University, and 1,100 faculty members. PolOff spoke with professors, senior university administrators, police and journalists about the August unrest. The following account draws on all of these interviews but particularly the eyewitness account of Nazib Wadood, a journalist who also serves as a medical officer at the university clinic.

¶3. (SBU) Small-scale protests began at Rajshahi University on August 21 in solidarity with Dhaka University students who a day earlier had scuffled with soldiers billeted on their campus. Protests flared again early on August 22 but initially attracted only a few dozen participants, including students and teachers affiliated with the Awami League and leftist organizations. They marched to the main campus gate and threw bricks at police deployed outside, who countered with bricks and tear gas. Throughout the remainder of the day the protesting students, who according to Wadood numbered perhaps 300-400 at the peak of the unrest, ransacked a number of campus buildings, including the vice chancellor, s residence and the medical center, and torched one military vehicle. At times they chanted political slogans calling for the end of the Caretaker Government, s restrictions on civil liberties and the release of Sheikh Hasina, the imprisoned leader of the Awami League and former Prime Minister who is in jail on corruption charges. A small number of outsiders joined the rioting, some covering their faces with black bandanas. Police entered campus firing rubber bullets and tear gas, and by evening the unrest ebbed with the imposition of a curfew and suspension of classes. One rickshaw driver was killed when hit by rubber bullets; the battles also left two students with serious injuries and more than a dozen policemen hurt.

¶4. (SBU) The rioting did not rise to the level of violence that periodically has rocked Rajshahi University over local issues in the past. A number of factors probably helped contain the unrest, including the authorities, decision to close the university, s main gate on August 22. Wadood also believes that while local residents are upset about inflation

-- a main reason why the rioting in Dhaka spread to other parts of Bangladesh -- people in Rajshahi are not so aggrieved that they will return to the street.8

15. (U) PolOff found Rajshahi to be calm three weeks after the rioting. It is a sleepy, poor city of 700,000 on the banks of the Padma River near the border with India. Famous for its mangos, schools of higher education and silk weaving, but devoid of other industries, the pace of city life is decidedly less frenetic than Dhaka. Very few cars and trucks ply its main road to compete with ubiquitous rickshaws, many of which are decorated with paintings of a female Rambo) well muscled, wrapped in a bandoleer and menacingly wielding a nasty hand cannon. Rajshahi University's top official, Vice Chancellor Altaf Hossain, during a five-minute courtesy call chose not to describe his harrowing personal experience during the riots but instead proudly noted that a recent London School of Economics survey proclaimed Rajshahi the happiest city on Earth.

16. (SBU) Under that serene veneer, though, is tension. A police roundup of eight faculty members accused of participating in the unrest has left colleagues uneasy. Teachers are very unhappy, they are afraid,8 according to one chemistry professor. We are very sorry our teachers are in custody,8 said Pro Vice-Chancellor Mumnunul Keramat, who holds the second highest position on campus. They should be given proper treatment and proper justice.8

16. (SBU) Comment: The Rajshahi University anti-government protests fell far short of those in Dhaka, in part because discontent with the Caretaker Government does not appear as extreme as in the capital. Rajshahi officials took a number of steps to minimize the unrest: sealing off the university; initially keeping the police off campus to cool tempers; and

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not arresting, at least for now, four students accused in the riots. While impossible to gauge student attitudes while school is suspended, faculty and administrators were optimistic classes will resume in October without a hitch.

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